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**‘Danger lurks around every corner’: fear of crime and its impact on opportunities for social interaction in stigmatised Australian suburbs**

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# **‘DANGER LURKS AROUND EVERY CORNER’: FEAR OF CRIME AND ITS IMPACT ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION IN STIGMATISED AUSTRALIAN SUBURBS**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines some of the ways in which fear of crime impacts upon opportunities for social interaction among residents in stigmatised suburbs. As we explore in this article, neighbourhoods that are stigmatised by virtue of material disadvantage and poor reputations tend to be associated with a number of social problems, including higher rates of crime. This association with crime, our research suggests, has an impact on social interaction in these neighbourhoods. Specifically, fear of crime may make people less likely to draw on forms of social interaction which enable people to build trust through contact with their fellow residents. In developing this position, the article draws on qualitative data detailing residents' perceptions of safety in three neighbourhoods in Adelaide, South Australia, two of which are stigmatised as 'problem neighbourhoods'. The article concludes by considering the public policy implications that arise from the research.

**Key words:** fear of crime, stigma, suburbs, public housing, social interaction

## **INTRODUCTION**

Fear of crime is now an established part of the social landscape in Australian capital cities. The increasing anxiety of parents for the safety of their children, the presence of security alarms on homes and businesses and the growing popularity of gated communities are all testimony to a heightened apprehension about our personal safety. Such mounting fearfulness also extends to a landscape of fear in which certain places (the dark alley, the isolated train station, the park after dark) are regarded as dangerous locations where the risk of crime is perceived to be greater than elsewhere. One of these seemingly dangerous places is the so called 'rough neighbourhood', stigmatised because of its perceived high rates of crime, drug abuse, poverty, social disorder, poor physical environment and often higher than average numbers of residents in public housing.

The public housing estates that were developed across Australia during the 1950's to mid 1980's have increasingly become 'problem places' that are home to 'problem people' and repositories for social exclusion (Arthurson & Jacobs 2004). As detailed elsewhere (Arthurson 1998, 2004; Randolph & Judd 2000), economic changes, coupled with changes in family structures and progressively tighter restrictions governing access to public housing, has "resulted in tenants who increasingly experience problems of unemployment, low-income and poverty and, in some instances, increasing incidences of crime and violence" (Palmer *et al.* 2004: 412). The shift over the past two decades from public housing for families and working tenants to welfare housing has meant that public housing estates now feature amongst the most disadvantaged urban areas in Australia, with several studies demonstrating links between public housing and concentrations of poverty and related disadvantages (Carter *et al.* 1998; Holloway *et al.* 1998; Massey & Kanaiaupuni 1993; Sampson 1990). More particularly, the harsh social realities that often accompany such poverty are routinely appropriated by the media. Local media in South Australia, for example, describes The Parks public housing estate in the following way:

The Parks of 2004 is a far cry from the tight knit working class community of the 1950s which was dominated by industrial workers and their families. Decades of neglect have seen the area deteriorate into one of Australia's most disadvantaged. Today it is a welfare dumping ground, scarred by high levels of unemployment, poverty line incomes and ageing Housing Trust stock" (*Messenger Press*, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2004).

### Stigmatised suburbs

As such media reporting begins to suggest, suburbs with high concentrations of public housing tenants and their residents are often stigmatised as 'dangerous', deviant', 'criminal' or 'anti-social' and such reputations reinforce many of the difficulties of these suburbs. Indeed, a growing body of literature points out that public housing is largely viewed in the popular imagination as being emblematic of a whole range of social problems (Hastings & Dean 2003: 172; Cole *et al.* 1999; Power 1987; Forrest & Kearns 2001; Dean & Hastings 2000). Viewed as such, residents in these suburbs are vilified as 'dangerous', deviant', 'criminal' or 'anti-social', caught in what Taylor describes as a "cycle of labelling and exclusion" (1998: 821).

The European literature points to the crucial role that the media play in sustaining or verifying outsiders' negative images of social housing areas, promoting images of 'the incapable tenant', the 'dreadful estate', high crime rates and youth gangs (see De Decker & Pannecouke 2004; Damer 1992; Brattbakk & Hansen 2004; Wassenberg 2004). The Australian media also has a long history of negatively portraying public housing. As far back as 1973, Brennan comments that some of the mass media painted the Green Valley area in Sydney's west as if it were "the repository of most of society's ills and that it is populated by a group of people who are especially incompetent or blameworthy" (Brennan 1973: 2). More recently, Arthurson (2002) raises the issue of how media portrayals often exaggerate, misrepresent and embellish negative representations of the housing estates. Inala, for instance, is depicted by the media as a bad suburb, one of the worst in Brisbane, even though data do not support this view. The housing authority acknowledges that whilst there are problems with high crime rates in Inala, in other suburbs the problems are greater. Most of the bad press arises because the regional courthouse, located in Inala, processes all the legal cases for the western corridor of Brisbane. Consequently, media reports the crime as happening in Inala even though it may be entirely unrelated to the public housing estate (Fischer 1998: 195). Similarly, East Fairfield Estate in NSW, prior to the decision taken to demolish it, was commonly characterised in the press as 'The Bronx' (Arthurson 2004).

Other research however finds that residents' perceptions of their housing and location are often *different* to those living outside of the neighbourhood. An Australian qualitative study, for example, found that some residents in stigmatised suburbs and housing were actively involved with and committed to their community, proud of the suburbs they lived in and despairing of those media portrayals and popular assumptions that stigmatise their suburbs (Palmer *et al.* 2004: 412). Nonetheless, the concentration of disadvantage and related social problems remain in these suburbs, despite some residents experiencing a different version of neighbourhood life to that customarily assumed by those living outside of the area.

### **Crime, disadvantage and social interaction**

Many studies have found a strong association between locational disadvantage and crime (see Pickett 2001; Almgren *et al.* 1998; Curry & Spergel 1988; Krivo & Peterson 1996; Sampson, *et al.* 1997; Chiricos

1987; Blau & Blau 1982; Devery, 1992; Weatherburn *et al.* 1997). In an Australian study, Judd *et al.* note that “crime rates have long been known to be higher in areas and among individuals affected by economic disadvantage” (2002: 13). There is also evidence to suggest that disadvantaged people are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of crime (McNulty 1999; Messner & Tardiff 1986; Stubbs & Hardy 2000).

Other research suggests that high rates of deprivation may reduce informal control mechanisms, which, in turn, lead to increased crime and violence. Such a perspective finds its theoretical antecedents in the ‘Social Disorganisation Theory’ of the Chicago School (Shaw & McKay, 1942 in Kawachi *et al.* 1999)<sup>1</sup> which argues that communities which lack social cohesion are less effective in exerting informal social control to establish and maintain norms to reduce crime and violence. In this way, it is argued that social connections between neighbours affect the local stock of trust, cohesion and resources for collective action in the community (Sampson, 1995) and that strong ties between residents promote informal measures of social control in neighbourhoods, which deters crime and promotes feelings of safety. Thus, the relationship between fear of crime and the social life of neighbourhoods can be self-reinforcing. That is, a fear of crime may promote distrust between neighbours, which interferes with the ability of neighbours to form social ties, which may lead further to the breakdown of order in the area and increased fear of crime (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Ross, Mirowsky & Pribesh, 2002; Ross, Mirowsky & Pribesh, 2001; Skogan, 1991).

Importantly for this article, a growing body of research suggests that the ways in which people perceive their neighbourhood can affect the degree to which they participate and interact in their community (Macintyre & Ellaway 1999; Macintyre & Ellaway 2000; Austin *et al.* 2002; Ziersch *et al.* 2005). Much of this research indicates that there is a strong link between social interaction, ‘local opportunity structures’ and perceptions of crime and safety within neighbourhoods (Macintyre & Ellaway 2000).<sup>2</sup> Baum and Palmer, for example, note that “in areas where there are multiple social problems, the

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<sup>1</sup> Social disorganisation is defined as the ‘inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls’ (Sampson & Groves, 1989 in Kawachi *et al.* 1999).

opportunity structures do appear to be perceived as unsafe” (2000: 355), and residents are less likely to frequent places and locations within their neighbourhoods that can facilitate social interaction such as parks, shopping centres or other community hubs. Thus, whether or not neighbourhoods, and the people who live in them, are perceived to be safe or unsafe, has an impact upon opportunities for social interaction within these neighbourhoods.

## METHODS

This article is based on data from an exploratory qualitative research study in three neighbourhoods in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia, conducted between September and November 2003. The data used in this study relate to the residents’ perceptions of crime in their neighbourhoods and the impact that this has on their opportunities for social interaction. Using the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, three suburbs were selected, two of which had relatively high concentrations of public housing and one which had low. The key demographic characteristics of these suburbs are described below.

### Demographic profile of study areas

Matchville has a population of 3872.<sup>3</sup> One percent of this population is Indigenous, 21% were born overseas and 6% speak a language other than English. The median age of residents is 32 and median household income is \$500-\$599. The median weekly rent is \$50-\$99 and median monthly housing loan repayments are \$400-\$599. Twenty one percent of those aged over 15 have tertiary education, with 3% having a Bachelor degree or higher. The unemployment rate is 17%.

Midvale has a population of 4934. 66. One percent are Indigenous, 24% were born overseas and 6% speak a language other than English. The median age is 38 and median household income is \$400-499. The median weekly rent is \$50-\$99, and median monthly housing loan repayments are \$400-599. Twenty one

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<sup>2</sup> Local opportunity structures are “the socially constructed and socially patterned features of the physical and social environment which may promote health either directly or indirectly through the possibility they provide for people to live healthy lives” (Macintyre & Ellaway 2000: 343).

<sup>3</sup> All of the following data comes from the Australian Census 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics. To ensure anonymity when releasing data at smaller aggregations, the Australian Bureau of Statistics randomly alters some Census information slightly. This means that overall totals, for example for the population or number of dwellings, can vary slightly. Percentages may also not add up to 100 due to rounding.

percent of those aged over 15 have tertiary education, with 3% having a Bachelor degree or higher. The unemployment rate is 17.3%.

Hilltown has a population of 11,935 people. One percent of these are Indigenous, 26% were born overseas and 10% speak a language other than English. The median age is 36 and median household income is \$800-899. The median weekly rent is \$150-\$199 and median monthly housing loan repayments is \$600-799. Thirty nine percent of those aged over 15 have tertiary education, with 12% having a degree or higher. The unemployment rate is 5.6%.

Further comparative data on housing tenure, family types and population transience is show below in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Table 4 lists the number of criminal offences recorded in each suburb.

**Table 1: Number (%) of dwellings in each housing tenure:**

	Matchville	Midvale	Hilltown
Fully owned or purchased	793 (52)	1125 (54)	3569 (86)
Rented from State Housing Authority	477 (31)	590 (28)	35 (1)
Rented from other source	180 (12)	255 (12)	391 (9)
Other	78 (5)	121 (6)	139 (3)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1,525</b>	<b>2091</b>	<b>4134</b>

**Table 2: Number (%) of family types:**

	Matchville	Midvale	Hilltown
Couple family with children	414 (40)	508 (38)	1917 (55)
Couple family without children	287 (28)	481 (36)	1,123 (32)
One-parent family	323 (31)	336 (25)	427 (12)
Other family	15 (1)	17 (1)	27 (1)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1043</b>	<b>1337</b>	<b>3494</b>



Table 3: Number (%) at same address 1 and 5 years ago

	Matchville	Midvale	Hilltown
At address 1 year ago <sup>a</sup>	607 (18)	720 (15)	1,586 (14)
At address 5 years ago <sup>b</sup>	1,186 (35)	1554 (35)	4,021 (37)

<sup>a</sup> aged over 1 year

<sup>b</sup> aged over 5 years

Table 4: Rate per 1,000 population of criminal offences recorded<sup>4</sup>

	Matchville	Midvale	Hilltown
Offences against person (excluding sexual offences)	24.3	26.4	4.7
Sexual offences	1.8	4.6	0.6
Robbery and extortion	1.3	2.1	0.2
Crimes against property	175.6	152.0	58.1

### Sampling

From each of these suburbs, residents were purposively selected on the basis of housing tenure for participation in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Respondents were recruited for voluntary participation via fliers distributed to primary schools and community health services, as well as those placed on noticeboards in libraries, supermarkets, veterinary, medical and dental surgeries, real estate agents and other public places in each area. An advertisement was also placed in the local community newspaper covering the study areas. Each suburb was also letter box dropped with two hundred fliers calling for volunteers to take part in interviews and focus groups. The South Australian Housing Trust and Homestart also mailed information about the project to their tenants and residents to help with recruitment. Three focus groups and four in-depth interviews were conducted, with a total of 17 participants.

The interview and focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis with the assistance of the NUD\*IST software package. Validity of the analysis was ensured by triangulation of the different sources

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<sup>4</sup> Data taken from the South Australian Office of Crime Statistics & Research (2003)

of data by at least two members of the project team, and by at least two members of the research team being involved in coding each set of data.

## RESULTS

The three sections of the results report data from the two high public housing areas. Following this, the data from the low public housing area are discussed.

### Unsafe places: resident's perceptions of Midvale and Matchville

The qualitative data suggests that residents of the areas with high public housing, Midvale and Matchville, regard parts of their neighbourhoods as being places where they feel some degree of apprehension for their own safety. Karen<sup>5</sup>, an elderly female resident describes living in Matchville in the following way:

"I mean you go out the door with a handbag on your hand and you're frightened if you....well I go with a walking stick when I do walk a little bit. I'm frightened that somebody's going to come behind you and bash you over the head to grab your handbag."

While for some, this sense of vulnerability was related to their perception of the *entire* neighbourhood as being unsafe, for others, this perception was localised or directed towards certain pockets of the suburb rather than the suburb as a whole. For these people, their accounts of the 'roughness' of their neighbourhood were quite specific in terms of identifying particular streets or areas that were more problematic than others:

"when we split it [Midvale] up – um – the bad bits – well I know where you can do all your drugs, plus I know where you can buy them in the area....down by the creek there and the units" (Lelsey, Midvale).

the bad bit is over by [another] Street, down the back of the Community House and running along near the train line. That's where a lot of the "bad" element comes from shall we say!" (Barbara, Midvale)

As we report elsewhere, the ‘bad bits’ in Midvale were described as having higher degrees of domestic violence and drug use. In the words of one of the respondents from that study, the ‘bad bits’ of Midvale were home to “the people that are more into domestic violence, more into child abuse, more into drugs” (Palmer *et al.* 2004: 420).

Whether someone drove or walked through their neighbourhood had an influence on their perceptions of the safety of their suburb, as evidenced in this following exchange from a focus group conducted in Matchville:

Interviewer: “How do you find Matchville, Amy?

Amy: I actually quite like it.

Carol: But you drive.

Amy: That’s true, I do drive so I don’t have to worry about walking around.  
That is a really good point. So I see things from a slightly different perspective as well.”

For several respondents, their fear of crime in their suburb was related to a heightened sense of vulnerability when using public transport. Those who were worried about crime on public transport avoided catching buses at certain times of the day or night, citing specific instances that made them fearful of using public transport at what they regarded as ‘unsafe’ times:

“I never catch a bus after 1.00 pm because this boy....he literally kicked the back window out of the bus...and then started to kick the middle doors out...The bus couldn’t go anywhere because there was glass all over the road and everything .... The school kids I keep away from” (Karen, Matchville).

Such quotations also make clear that, for some respondents, the behaviour of specific individuals or groups of people gave rise to their apprehension. In this instance, young people were one such group

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of respondents.

whose behaviour made some residents particularly fearful. For some, it was a general apprehension about “young kids wandering the street and things like that.” (Lena, Matchville). For others however, quite specific behaviours and activities were identified as provoking fear and apprehension:

“the one that lives on that side of the street, contrary to what his Mummy and Daddy think, is the local hoon and I wouldn’t give him the keys to my house! Your house would be done over. He is one of the four group members called AOD [Adults of Destruction] – that does all the graffiti around here” (Barbara, Midvale).

Residents with mental health issues were also regarded as being ‘dangerous’ and threatening, particularly in Matchville, with several of the participants in interviews and focus groups claiming to avoid people who displayed what appeared to be signs of mental illness, fearing them to be a “danger to themselves and those around them” (Lena, Matchville). People occupying emergency public housing were also singled out as being particularly ‘dangerous’ people, as evidenced in the summation of Liz, a resident in public housing in Matchville: “they think ‘cause it’s emergency housing type, we get a lot of hooligans.”

While for most participants it was the perception or the possibility of danger that contributed to their fearfulness and apprehension, others had actually experienced violence first hand, which heightened their sense of vulnerability. Margaret spoke of “having the front door kicked in for no reason whatsoever”, while another described a series of episodes, some violent, committed against her property: “I’ve had eggs thrown at my house, I’ve had my letter box graffitied. I’ve had the outside of my house graffitied. Been abused. Then we had a gun shot here, Thursday week ago” (Karen, Matchville). As such accounts make clear, the residents in Matchville (and to a lesser extent Midvale) who took part in the research, share a perception that parts of their neighbourhoods are indeed dangerous, evidenced, in part, by the behaviour and activities of certain individuals and groups of people who live in these suburbs.

### **Fear of crime and its impact on social interaction**

The qualitative data indicated that the ways in which people perceive and experience fear, especially in relation to the risk of becoming a victim of crime, can have a detrimental impact on opportunities for social interaction at the neighbourhood level.

In broad terms, a reluctance to become involved with the social or civic activities in the neighbourhood was linked to a perceived risk to personal safety. This manifested itself most notably in a tendency “to just keep to myself”. One woman from Midvale, for example, reported that “a lot of people want to stay home. They don’t want to get involved because....I think they’re, well...a lot of people are frightened to come out. They don’t want to.”

Elsewhere, residents reported people being too fearful to even open their front door:

“when we did this doorknock for Neighbourhood Watch...we did over 100 homes and a lot of the time people weren’t home but a lot of time people were home but they wouldn’t answer the door because they were frightened and this was during the day because we did not doorknock at night time” (Carol, Matchville).

Such comments also reflect the way in which night time helps to construct a landscape of fear that curtails opportunities for social interaction. That is, what might be regarded as a reasonably safe place during daylight hours, becomes a ‘no go’ zone after dark.

Other respondents described a situation in which personal experiences of crime had impacted upon their ability and willingness to become involved in community life:

“I just stay to myself....I think probably because I don’t trust people....Until I was broken into I felt really good. Like I said, I never locked my back door. Once I went away, and I told one person in the neighbourhood that I was going away and that weekend I was broken into” (Susan, Midvale).

Here, we see a particular event altering this resident’s sense of safety in her neighbourhood, changing it from a suburb where she trusted people implicitly to one that was now home to people whom she was profoundly suspicious of.

Fear of crime and its impact on opportunities for social interaction also manifested itself in terms of some residents feeling uneasy around certain sites within their neighbourhood where particular kinds of

people gathered. Some of the participants in the Matchville focus group, for example, claimed to avoid the large, local shopping centre because of some of the groups of people who hung around it:

“I don’t like going to [the shopping mall]. I’m quite nervous at [the shopping mall]. I don’t shop there. Very seldom, only if I have to go there for some particular reason. And I don’t go there, because I find the area around the social security area, I find it quite scary”  
(Margaret, Matchville).

### Children and safety

The perceived safety of neighbourhoods was closely linked to parents’ apprehension for the welfare of their children. While only one of the respondents had small children, a broader anxiety of children playing unsupervised was noted by several of the participants. Liz, who had teenage children in Matchville, noted that: “as soon as school holidays come, you never see a child out on the street, not riding bike, nothing, unless they’re getting in out of a car to go with their parents or getting on a bus. Because children just don’t wander the street anymore.”

The 1982 abduction of a young girl from her Matchville home was also identified as contributing to the stigma of the southern suburbs:

Amy: We had police come and doorknock all the houses in Matchville, asking about  
[the abducted girl]...

Carol And that’s another stigma on the area.

Lena And when [another girl] went missing, Matchville again became, you know....  
Even though that was in [another suburb], it was another stigma on this  
general southern area.

Society’s anxieties around children were articulated by several respondents as being a significant barrier to children taking part in informal activities in their neighbourhoods such as playing in public spaces or talking to unknown adult residents. Barbara, a middle aged woman from Midvale, with adult children

and grandchildren of her own, reported the following encounter with the parents of the young children living over her back fence:

“the neighbours who live at the back of us – they’re a young couple with two children – two and a half to three and about five years of age. My husband will be outside planting veggies and the people who lived there before, usually they’d talk to you, but this lot! The little boy said “hello” and the parents immediately said “come here! – don’t talk to the lady! I thought – ‘ok yeh stranger danger and all that stuff,’ but it’s a bit sad!”

Other comments provided evidence of the sense of anxiety about the safety of children that is now commonplace in most suburban contexts. In response to the observation that children were no longer riding their bikes or playing in the streets, another woman from the Matchville focus group retorted that “it’s also the fact that, who do you trust? Who the hell can you trust anymore? Because the nice little old guy up the road. He might look ok, but he might have a pretty sick mind.” In other words, the apprehension that surrounds children provides a useful window into a broader theme; that of neighbourhoods in which nearly all strangers and acquaintances need to be treated with caution. In light of such sentiments, it is perhaps not surprising that opportunities for social interaction are limited to close neighbours and friends in the neighbourhood.

### **Media representations and fear of crime**

In support of the qualitative data presented here, the media reporting of these ‘dangerous suburbs’ is also part of the contextual backdrop against which to consider people’s heightened anxiety for their personal safety when living in suburbs that are stigmatised as ‘rough’ or ‘dangerous’. In the case of Midvale and Matchville, the media coverage of a violent assault that took place during one of the weeks in which the research was being conducted provides a timely illustration of the ways in which media representations of stigmatised suburbs can contribute to resident’s fear of crime and its impact upon opportunities for social interaction.

At the time of the fieldwork which informs this article, two men were assaulted by “a gang of up to 20 youths” (*The Advertiser* October 28th, 2003) when they tried to stop a graffiti attack, triggering a spate of

media reporting of 'savagery in the suburbs' (*The Advertiser*, Tuesday October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 4). "Gangs of young thugs roaming the streets at night, vandalising property and assaulting people" were reported in *The Advertiser*. An apposite headline provides the title for this article: in one instance, the southern suburbs were described as places "where danger lurks around every corner" (*The Advertiser* October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 1).

Importantly for this article, the media also reported that some residents in Midvale had become socially isolated through fear of crime. Over the course of the week in which this incident took place, the narrative direction of the media coverage shifted from presenting the problem – the thuggery and violence – to describing the *socially isolating effects of fear of crime*. By-lines such as "Don't tell us gangs don't exist, say the residents too afraid to go out at night" (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 1) or "they are the suburbs of fear – where residents are afraid to leave the safety of their homes at night" (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 4) portrayed a scene of whole suburbs of people secured away from danger.

Elsewhere in the newspaper, articles quoted residents for whom social interaction had all but ceased:

"We are prisoners in our own home. We feel helpless, we don't go out because we are putting ourselves at risk" (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 1).

"Friday and Saturday nights and you don't go out, simply you are putting yourself at risk" (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003: 5).

*The Advertiser* went on to quote 'Clarence', a middle aged man who had been savagely beaten by two youths while out walking in Midvale as follows: "Clarence is deeply worried about the issues raised by the attack – the scenario of adults too scared to walk down the street to the shops" (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday October 29<sup>th</sup> 2003: 4). Critically for this article, such quotations convey the very real impact that fear of crime may have on social interaction. In such examples, basic opportunities for social engagement and interaction with others – walking in the street, going to the shops – have been stifled by a perceived risk to personal safety.



While such negative media reporting of the suburbs and their residents, as well as perceptions of risk of crime, are certainly part of living in the stigmatised suburbs of Matchville and Midvale, it is important to note that this is just *one* dimension of life in these neighbourhoods. Parts of our research reported elsewhere found that residents in these stigmatised suburbs were also actively involved with and committed to their community, proud of the suburbs they live in and despairing of those media portrayals and popular assumptions that continue to stigmatise their suburbs (Palmer *et al.* 2004). Some of the residents who took part in this research were involved with a wide range of social and civic activities that confounded the stereotype of residents as disengaged from their community. In other words, while fear of crime may provide a backdrop to many of the experiences of residents in suburbs like Midvale and Matchville, to portray the entire area as being a 'suburb of fear' is to miss many of the complex, multiple realities of people's experiences of neighbourhood life.

#### Safe as houses: resident's perceptions of Hilltown

The previous sections described the perceptions of personal safety and vulnerability of residents in the stigmatised suburbs of Matchville and Midvale. By contrast, residents who took part in the focus group in the comparatively affluent suburb of Hilltown reported markedly different perceptions of crime. As discussed further in this section, fear of crime in Hilltown was related, almost exclusively, to property, rather than to personal safety. For all of the respondents in the focus group, Hilltown was regarded as a safe place to live, with notions of safety frequently being aligned with attributes such as 'quiet' or 'pleasant'. For example, Brian described Hilltown in the following way: "it's a pleasant area to be and then I'm always pleased to take our grandchildren. We often go walking around the area, perhaps to the different and playgrounds and it's so. It's a pleasant area to be in."

As we saw in Midvale and Matchville however, nightfall changed one's perception of the neighbourhood. Helen regarded Hilltown as a safe place to live, however she and her husband tended not to venture out of their home after dark: "We don't go walking at night or go out much at night. I mean, I think most areas have got an undercurrent of mugging, vandalism and drug dealing going on." It is worth noting

however, that such comments from these elderly residents were more reflective of feeling nervous about their declining physical abilities rather than a generalised fear of crime in their suburb.

While the streets and the suburb of Hilltown more broadly were regarded as being safe, focus group participants spoke of crime in terms of damage to property, such as graffiti or vandalism, or in terms of household security. Several residents had elaborate security systems, the purchase prompted by the experience of having been burgled at home: “we’ve got absolute security, as much as you can get. We were broken into... and I’ll tell you what it’s left a mark on me....In this house we’ve got even more security, because it makes you feel very anxious” (Brian). For those respondents who had experienced burglary first hand, the experience confronted their notions of home as a safe place, with respondents claiming to feel violated, particularly in the knowledge that strangers had been in their intimate domestic spaces: “they went through all the bedroom and it was really horrible” (Helen).

While fear of crime was linked to perceived threats to property, it was not linked to social interaction in the way that we saw in Midvale and Matchville. Rather than a fear for personal safety, barriers to opportunities for social interaction in Hilltown were attributed to urban planning and housing design. Peter, who had emigrated from the United Kingdom with his wife, described two aspects of housing design as impacting on social interaction:

“I have a theory about this, and it’s based on comparing it with the UK...I believe that remote control garage doors are everyone’s problems, because people drive home, they sit in the car, they press the button, the garage door goes up, they drive in. They don’t see their neighbours... You see shutters on windows, and because the houses are all detached, quite often there is no need to talk to your neighbour unless he’s going away and wants you to look after your house. So the idea of community, unless there’s specific activities going on in your area, you’re not privy to what’s happening.”

Another resident described the effects of this sort of housing design on social interaction:

“I’ve been there 10 years and people move in and...they all get a remote control. One of the first things they do. Roller shutters, electronic door control. My next door neighbour, we don’t even have a fence between our house and if I’m at the car I still don’t get to talk to him. It’s a wave but it’s as he backs down the drive. So there’s not the opportunity for face to face interaction there, and consequently when something needs doing as a result of cooperation between two neighbours like a tree needs a branch cut off or that., he doesn’t know how to approach me” (Steve).

Barriers to social interaction in Hilltown were also related to broader changes in society such as women returning to work after childbirth indeed work itself:

“You now have households like my daughter’s where both parents work. They often are too tired and they’ve got children.. They haven’t got time to participate” (Helen).

“Now we’re retired, I mean we know all the people at the back [of their house], we know the people either side...but we’ve got the time to get involved in things, which when you’re out working you can’t” (Brian).

Another obstacle to becoming involved with social and civic activities in Hilltown was a general absence of trust borne out of a lack of knowledge about one’s neighbours. Indeed, Hilltown is just one suburb in a world of risky strangers in which what or who we don’t know is feared. As Furedi notes “if you do not know very much about your neighbours, it is difficult to feel any affinity towards them. If you do not know what your neighbours do for a living, it is easy to imagine they are up to no good” (1998: 127). Accordingly, residents spoke of a need to get to build trust within neighbourhoods through getting to know people:

One of the questions is about ‘do you trust your neighbours’ and I thought to myself, you’d have to get to know them first” (Brian).

“I think in New Zealand and British villages, the community is small enough to become very acquainted with each other and that’s the only thing that you can base trust on. If you’re not acquainted you can’t assume trust” (Steve).

## DISCUSSION

From the research, it is clear that fear of crime is expressed differently depending on the suburb in which people live. For most of the respondents in Midvale and Matchville, the neighbourhoods with high levels of public housing, their perceptions of the neighbourhoods they lived in were ones in which fears of physical vulnerability and personal safety were particularly acute. Residents in these suburbs reported feeling uneasy in the presence of certain individuals or groups of people – young people and those exhibiting signs of mental illness, or around certain parts of the neighbourhood – the ‘bad bits’ as they put it. As such, people felt less safe to walk around their suburbs, to use public transport and to let children play unsupervised. In Hilltown, by contrast, perceptions of vulnerability were linked to home security and to loss of material possessions rather than to an anxiety that theirs was an unsafe neighbourhood.

In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, such perceptions of crime and safety were also framed by the media representations of these neighbourhoods that contributed to their overall negative image as being places where the risk of being a victim of crime is promoted as greater than in other locations. This tendency of the media to exaggerate and embellish the ‘problems’ of the ‘problem neighbourhoods’ reflects a failure of the mainstream media in Australia to deal with the complexities of social problems. While there are certainly many problems in these socially and materially disadvantaged communities, the media rarely reports on the positive aspects of life in these neighbourhoods. Far from accurately capturing the complex, multiple realities of people’s lived experience in the southern suburbs, the media stories reported in this research contribute to a broader discourse which positions certain suburbs and their residents as ‘dangerous’, deviant’, ‘criminal’ or ‘anti-social’. This sense of pervasive fear is also heightened by a contemporary political agenda that stresses the need for “tough on crime responses”. As Jacobs points out the media both reflects the nature of on-going policy debates and “draw from existing narratives of social reality” (2001: 133).

In all three suburbs however, fear of crime was frequently related to the “unpredictable stranger” (Tulloch *et al.* 1998). Distrust was born, with some exceptions, not so much out of real experiences of crime, rather out of a fear of what *might* happen. Such anxieties find their antecedents in a lack of knowledge about the personal circumstances of strangers and acquaintances, in this case neighbours (Furedi, 1989; Lupton, 1999; Lupton & Tulloch 1999). Our research supports Furedi’s argument that where people don’t know each other, there is a tendency to expect the worst of them. This was particularly marked where children were concerned. As we saw in the interviews and focus groups, actions were often given the worst possible interpretation, resulting in children being discouraged from talking to neighbours or playing unsupervised.

In general, our research suggests that opportunities for social interaction were curtailed more out of fear of crime rather than in any real basis that a crime was likely to be committed, although a small number of residents had experienced crime first hand. Fear of becoming a victim of crime had a much more direct relationship to opportunities for social interaction in Midvale and Matchville than Hilltown. In the former neighbourhoods, residents reported avoiding certain parts of the suburb and certain locations at particular times of the day or night, thus limiting their opportunities for mixing with other residents. As other research demonstrates (Baum & Palmer 2002; Macintyre, 2002), opportunity structures are important facilitators of social interaction and cohesion. Where there are barriers to visiting or using these opportunity structures, social interaction breaks down. As our research suggests, basic opportunities for social engagement and interaction at opportunity structures in Midvale and Matchville were thwarted by residents’ perceptions of a risk to their personal safety. As Wilson-Dorges notes, “fear negatively affects quality of life over a long period of time, leading people to unnecessarily secure themselves, remove themselves from social activities and increase levels of distrust of others” (2000: 600).

In Hilltown, by contrast, different barriers to social interaction were mentioned over and above fear of crime. The data reported from Hilltown suggested that particular kinds of housing design, as well as broader social changes, had created significant obstacles to getting to know one’s neighbours. As was

evidenced in the descriptions of residents secured away behind roller doors, residents of Hilltown may be spatially close to one another, yet remain quite isolated from each other in other respects.

## CONCLUSION

This research has pointed to the interaction between residents' fear of crime and the impact that this fear is likely to have on their patterns of social interaction. We recognise that there are no simple policy solutions to the problems of stigmatised suburbs that experience not only actual deprivation but also comparatively high levels of crime. Rather our study has implications for a range of policy areas, including, health, housing and general social policy, as well as the media.

The concentration of disadvantage in areas with high levels of public housing has increased in the past decade as a result of public policies that have reduced resources available for public housing and targeted access to more complex and impoverished tenants. The result is that the profile of public housing tenants has become more disadvantaged. These directions lead to resource-poor communities where unemployment and intergenerational unemployment is high. Add to this public policy concerning the deinstitutionalisation of people with mental illness who often find themselves in public housing with inadequate social support and the result is that some suburbs have developed with a concentration of people who are likely to be economically deprived, socially excluded and fearful.

In recent years social policy in Australia has drawn on notions of social capital as a basis for initiatives designed to improve living conditions (Winter, 2000). This policy direction is reflected in the establishment of a Social Inclusion Unit in South Australia and social exclusion initiatives in the UK (Pierson, 2002). Increasingly such policies do not just focus on people with disadvantages but also on locations in which there are high levels of disadvantage. The Health Action Zones in the UK are a good example of such an approach (Judge *et al.* 1999). One important focus of this work is to try and establish higher levels of trust within communities, however our research suggests that something of a chicken and egg situation may arise whereby the fear of crime inhibits the behaviours (informal chatting, walking through neighbourhoods, children being permitted to play in streets or front gardens) that build trust between neighbours. The fact that trust is often not established at a neighbourhood level may, in itself,

make the neighbour a less safe place to be. The complexity of perceptions of trust and fear mean that determining which policies might result in residents feeling safer and more trusting are hard to determine. Nonetheless we conclude this article with a discussion of some policy initiatives that might go some way changing negative perceptions and help reinforce more trusting behaviours and so operate to make suburbs safer.

One response to 'problem suburbs' that has been evident in all Australian states has been neighbourhood regeneration policies that incorporate housing upgrades and deliberate actions to change the social mix of the areas. Some of these projects have included crime prevention initiatives, community policing and explicit attempts to address anti-social behaviours initiatives. There is no clear evidence on the impact of these regeneration projects (see Arthurson & Jacobs 2004). To some extent these regeneration projects are trying to ameliorate the consequences of declining investment in public housing stock and increasing tensions between the social and commercial goals of housing authorities (Orchard, 1999). An alternative way to alter the social mix would be to reinvest in public housing so that it once again becomes more than a residual form of housing. This direction is extremely unlikely under present neo-liberal policy directions. It should, however, be a consideration for the future.

Community development may also offer a means of increasing trust and social integration in communities. In Australia community development initiatives originate from state government authorities including health, education and housing, local government or non-government organisations. They are sometimes part of neighbourhood renewal projects. The focus of the activity may be on better resourcing neighbourhood houses or community centres. Community development is rarely well-funded and often runs on a shoe string. An interesting policy experiment would be to fund a network of neighbourhood houses in "stigmatised" suburbs with paid staff with a remit to promote the positive aspects of the area, encourage more interaction between residents, look for local employment opportunities and encourage crime prevention initiatives. This initiative should be funded for at least a five year period and involve a detailed formative and, where possible, summative evaluation. The evaluation is crucial because it would help establish a data base of evidence about what aspects of community development are effective in reducing deprivation and stigma.

Deinstitutionalisation of mental health services have meant that there people with mental illness tend to live in low income suburbs. The health problems experienced by these people often act as a barrier to social interaction and research has found that residents may be fearful of people with mental illnesses. Currently, health services do very little to support these people with integration in to communities. Potentially, community development processes could encourage integration and, as well as helping the people with mental illness, could have spin off benefits for the broader community. Better integration should result in reduced stigma of people with mental illness and may be protective of people's health so that they make fewer demands on mental health services over the longer term.

While we acknowledge that it is very difficult to influence the media, it is irresponsible to sensationalise reporting of crime levels which results in the creation of fear. As social justice lobbyists we might argue for more responsibility, but we recognise that it is unlikely to happen given the commercial imperatives of the mainstream media. One advantage of community development processes is that, as a result, communities may be in a position to advocate against the bad press they receive and attempt to hold the media to some account. Baum *et al.* (1990) provide an account of protest against negative media reporting that led to a public meeting where the protests were voiced and extensively debated. Of course, such actions are a David and Goliath contest but the very act of protest does pull the community together through collective action and may result in some sense of empowerment against seemingly all powerful forces.

The stigmatisation of suburbs and the people who live within them is a common problem that compounds the difficulties of economically deprived suburbs. Multi-pronged policy initiatives are required to redress these problems and enable these economically disadvantaged suburbs to be more supportive of their residents' health and well-being.

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